

## Letting people talk in media? Portrait and problems of citizens' participation in audience discussion programmes

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### Abstract

Today's media landscape resembles much of León's (2010) interpretation of «a new informational ecosystem». However changes are not exclusively in terms of the content, as «drama, comic and spectacular» (Meyer, 2003) emerge as frequent news value in current media productions. Journalism, in particular, seems to demonstrate a special interest in what kind of contributions people are able to offer to their work. In some formats, such as the audience discussion programmes, it is likely to observe eager citizens who are interested in talking and taking part in those spaces.

Thus, it is probably helpful to analyse how media institutions are working towards letting people talk in these specific spaces. Positioning this topic under the concept of the 'citizens' engagement' in media, our observation will focus on two emblematic formats of public opinion on Portuguese radio and television. Hence, a comparison will be drawn according to several criteria: portrait of the participants (listeners and viewers) that take part in these formats; topics discussed, alongside a description of the commentators or guests invited by media productions (gender, provenience, invitation (actor/observer), job, programme and subject relationship).

This paper also grants a particular focus to the role of digital media, whether these platforms constitute real opportunities for public intervention or simply express a recent tendency in media and society. This study has also been represented in the research project «TV journalism and citizenship: the struggle for a new digital public sphere», held in the Communication & Society Research

Centre, in the University of Minho, (Braga – Portugal), which has worked as a permanent observatory of Portuguese television journalism.

**Keywords:** Public participation, digital engagement, citizenship, radio and television journalism

## 1. Possible roots for civic participation

There is a general – but true – tendency to assume that the birth of the occidental thought is profoundly rooted on the ancient Greek civilization, in a movement which had travelled first to Italy then to the rest of the European space. Especially important in the context of empowering citizens to engage with public affairs, the Greek forums have rapidly inspired the democratic models which have based their roots in this culture subsequently. In the Greek amphitheatres, oval and/or round buildings with tiers of seats around a central open area, as those used in ancient Rome for gladiatorial contests, there was a special attention to take into account the public matters into discussion, frequently widely participated by the Greek citizens, from a range of topics which included law to war, for instance (Sinclair, 1999).

In this regard, to be more specific, it has been acknowledged that since the Homeric period, around 4th century (B. C) to the 5th (A.D.), the Greek King had full capacities, stipulated by law, to gather in one reunion, commonly known by the Assembly, their citizens and political hierarchy to understand their personal opinions and thoughts regarded to the public affairs, especially those which were related to the daily routines of Athens. It is precisely in this context that we would aim to draw our comparison to the present reality in the media as the public opinion programs are considered the main focus of this research paper. In these formats, widely spread in radio and television, people are invited by media institutions to participate, thorough several platforms, from telephone to mobile and digital technological devices. In the Greek context, there were several constraints which are absent nowadays, meaning that only citizens had the real possibility to join the public assemblies, excluding slaves, women, foreign, in a general outlook. At this present time, as these questions related to the citizenry have been abandoned, it is also fair to recognize several limitations which prevent people to interact more with media productions, especially in these formats. Having in mind a similar Greek model, we are perfectly able to find public spaces for citizens' participation which guide their activity by discussing real problems of a community. Understanding present constrains underlined by the participants in these formats, in order to reach higher levels of intervention in the media scope, as well as comprehending their personal views regarding to participation *per se*, are the main objectives of this research, somehow inspired by the ancient Greek landscape of public intervention.

In a theoretical framework, the concept of 'participation' has been present in several recommendations stated by the European Commission which have defined it within a paradigm of an «active democracy, through intercultural dialogue exchange». Also the Study on Assessment Criteria for Media Literacy

Levels (2009) published by the EAVI (European Association for Viewers' Interests) described 'participation' as the key element for the social competence, a communicative skill in the top of the pyramid of the Structure of Media Literacy Assessment Criteria. Following studies such as those published by Sonia Livingstone and Peter Lunt (1992), this case study reflects about how media are keen to let people participate in some of their productions.

### **The ocean of definitions in the concept of 'participation'**

As Ernest Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985) have underlined, the concept of 'participation' has been able to travel throughout several seas. Starting from the simply definition of a dictionary<sup>1</sup>, 'participation' refers to «the fact of taking part, as in some action or attempt». The verb is to participate<sup>2</sup>, which could be described as «to take or have a part or share, as with others; partake; share». Although we might identify little ambiguity, there is room for admit that, in a minimum level, there is an implication to a communicative performance, recognizing its active role. Nonetheless, it is reasonable to collect other perspectives from some researches who have been interested in debating the nature of this concept.

Thus, there are quite a lot of contexts which it is likely to observe the concept of participation. It could be argued that is not a exclusive concept from politics or even the media scope, but it is a useful concept to understand the broad notion of civic engagement. Recognising its centrality to our reflections, citizens' participation in media has been claimed by a whole new post-electronic generation, although it remains unclear yet if these new possibilities of intervention in the journalistic formats dedicated to the public are significantly fostered by the advanced devices of communication. In the grasp of some theoretical contributions to the concept presently discussed, we could eventually remember Espen Ytterberg who defines citizens' participation in media as «participation is about mastering a set of performance roles that are given by the production context and by the requirements of the format» (2004: 678). Gunn Sara Enli, in other terms, believes that opening the gate of media productions to the citizens consists in a «perspective, not be reduced to media-centric participation, but also initiate democratic participation. In practice, however, the participatory formats are primarily designed to attract audiences on several platforms, and multi-platform formats are thus increasingly being embraced as one solution to the current challenges facing PSB associated with deregulation, digitalization and convergence» (2008:117). In addition it is also curious to observe that this researcher also points out that participation exists so that «audiences were encouraged to climb the great ladder of culture, to move from darkness to enlightenment» (2008:114).

Still in this superficial bibliographical review, Kiwan suggests to include the notion of motivation in the concept of participation as it has been considered that «understanding what motivates people to participate is crucial to

<sup>1</sup> <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/participation> [access on 05-04-2012].

<sup>2</sup> <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/participate> [access on 05-04-2012].

developing an inclusive conception of citizenship» (2007:228). Although remains in a certain way unclear this assumption, as we might draw a different range of motivations (desire to express opinions, political background and influence, spending leisure time, just to name a few – Ribeiro, 2008), there is a general acceptance to the idea that only motivated citizens are, in fact, able to participate in media platforms such as the audience discussion programs. Investigating precisely what kind of motivations are being drawn by those who interfere in these contexts should let media productions work for captivate a wider audience.

Evelina Dagnino (2004) refers that the concept of participation should be outside the politics scope, as it has been always granted attention to this notion in this field of studies. According to Dagnino, media should be focused in questioning public affairs such as «social inequality and poverty», so that real intervention of people in these contexts of broadcasting could produce real changes in social terms, in the daily life. The Brazilian researcher also notes that citizens' participation in media should be included in the field of moral, «in the terms of solidarity, the great claim of this redefined participation, disconnected from its political and collective meaning, in order to establish firmly in the private territory confined to moral» (2004:102).

Hence it is possibly to observe two additional dimensions to the concept of participation: motivation and morality. However, what other landscapes should be include in the portrait of participation? Howard Rheingold (2008) defends that new possibilities are coming along with the technological evolution. These communicative scenarios are strongly connected – to use a very up-to-date word – with mobile devices that allow individuals to interact not only with themselves but, in other perspective, with media formats such as those studied in this context. Following Rheingold, Internet, for instance, has been working around text, audio and video, using platforms like blogs, podcasts, video cast - not to mention the next communicative environment such as social networks – offering real possibilities for people to interact. As commonly happens, there is little attention to the debate related to people's abilities to manage those devices, their knowledge or even the access to. Those questions are frequently popped up by the media literacy studies (EAVI, 2009; Pérez-Tornero, 2004), as it is assumed that devices do not work by themselves, nor the awareness to deal with those things is necessarily easy and problems free.

It is also expected to find some criticism in the concept of participation, as Rosa Alfaro Moreno (2006) underlines that media institutions are keen to integrate citizens' voices in their domains just to guarantee a faithful audience, strongly associated with the ideal, following the author's perspectives, of „media marketing“. This might be controversial, but Moreno defends that media use participation as a key element to ensure audiences, building a coherent mental image of those formats in people's social representations.

## 2. Strings to attach people on the media: a comparative study in the Portuguese television and radio

In order to follow a comparison between the platforms that allow citizens to express their opinion on radio and on television, it was made an observation into the two most emblematic public opinion programmes in Portugal. Fórum TSF in radio and Opinião Pública in news TV SIC Notícias.

Opinião Pública is a television program that is broadcasted twice a day, 11 am and 5 pm,<sup>1</sup> on SIC Notícias, the first Portuguese thematic channel exclusively with information programmes hosted on cable and paid television. During the transmission of this program, TV viewers are invited to express their opinion about national and international affairs. The most important tool to participate remains in the telephone but it is possible to express opinion by email, the program website and through a forum hosted on social networks. On the other hand, Fórum TSF, it is an almost two-hour program, during the morning hours, promoted by private radio station TSF. Amid its goals, it is likely to observe the intention to engage with listeners by opening a public opinion space that gathers one of the possible topics of the day. Guests related to the subject are invited, as well as listener's contributions, especially via telephone, but now also available on TSF's Facebook page and its online forum.

To achieve the proposed goals, the study took place during an ordinary week, between 26<sup>th</sup> March and 2<sup>nd</sup> April of 2012. During the period of observation was developed a portrait of audiences that participate in the two programmes; an analyses about the ways of participation, from the telephone to digital platforms; the subject discussed and an observation about the profile of the commentators invited to take part on these programmes.

### a) Topic announcement

This first point of investigation is about the appeals made by the two programmes for people to engage during their transmission. During this examination the objective was to understand if there is an express and clear request by both platforms working towards citizen's participation.

Engagement platforms	Programmes	
	<i>Opinião Pública</i>	<i>Fórum TSF</i>
Broadcast	Between 3:30 pm and 4:30 pm	Right before "Noticiário das 9"
Web Site	3 pm and 3:30 pm	Between 9 am and 9:30 am
Social Networks	Only Facebook and in the last two days of analysis	On Facebook between 9:20 and 10:25 am

Table I - Topic announcement

<sup>1</sup> *Opinião Pública* programmes were only analysed during the afternoon period in order to have a similar base to both platforms: one per day.



Opinião Pública used to have during the present analyse a public appeal for viewers to comment the topic announced during SIC Notícias emission. The message with the telephone number, the email and the topic that would be discussed during the programme went to the air between 3:30 pm and 4:30 pm, almost one and half hour and half an hour before the programme starts. SIC Notícias, the most watched channel on cable television in Portugal, exclusively with news, has an own web site where it is possible to find a request for viewers to participation during Opinião Pública emission. Between 3pm and 3:30 pm viewers can find on web site the topic selected to be discussed during television emission. The last platform where it was possible to find an invitation for viewers to express their opinion during the programme was on social networks. In this particular gate of participation it was only available the information about the topic of the day on Facebook and only in the last two days of the investigation.

TSF is a radio platform known for news programmes and Fórum TSF is one of the most famous that goes to the air on this station. As a public opinion format the announcement of the topic discussed during the emission was made before 9am newscast. Here, in a short space of time the journalist explains the main issue of the day and the platforms that are available for listeners to engage. As it was showed in Opinião Pública, Fórum TSF has a developed space on internet where citizens are able to find the topic of the day, between an hour and half an hour right just before the programme starts. One important aspect of this point is that social networks are really explored by Fórum TSF. To understand this it was possible to find during all days, before and during the emission of the programme, a clear appeal driven for listeners to participate on the debate.

## b) Modalities of participation

Engagment platforms	Programmes	
	<i>Opinião Pública</i>	<i>Fórum TSF</i>
Telephone	48	49
Web Site	0	12
Email	1	0
Social Networks	0	14
Total participants	49	75

**Table II - Modalities of participation**

After the observation about the available platforms used by the two programmes to invite their audience to take part of the transmission, here the focus of the study tries to understand the platforms used by listeners and viewers to engage in the programme as active citizens. In this subject it was only taken in to account the public participation that went on air, both on radio and on television.

Opinião Pública relies its interactive spirit in the telephone. By the numbers it is possible to understand that this traditional media is the most used platform to

engage with viewers during this public opinion format. These numbers are more remarkable because during the five days of observation the total of participants that saw their contribution on the air was 49. In this group, 48 came from telephone and only one from email. Although SIC Notícias has a well developed Facebook and Twitter it was not possible to observe, during the five analysed emissions of Opinião Pública, any public participation from the forum created on social networks platforms.

In addition to have a larger number of participants during the live emission, a total of 75, Fórum TSF has a more diverse range of platforms used for people to express their opinion. Telephone is the most important used tool with 49 users during the five days of observation. Here, the journalist responsible for the programme uses to read some of the messages left by listeners on social networks in 14 times. *Fórum TSF* website is also a valid option for people to talk, as it is possible to understand by the 12 messages that went on air during the investigation.

### c) Participants profile

	Participants <i>Opinião Pública</i>									
Engagment platform	Gender		Age		Origin		Occupation			
Telephone	Men	31	Medium	50,8	Lisbon	21	Active	27		
	Women	17			North	11			Retired	10
					Centre	6			Unemployed	8
					Alentejo	4			Housekeeper	3
					Algarve	3				
					International	3				
Email	Men	1	Without Information							

Table III - Participants profile: Opinião Pública

In this point, the profile of the participants in these programmes is in the core of our reflection. The host introduces the listener with information regarding, age, origin and occupation.

As long as this research was being carried out, it was possible to find 31 men and 17 women by the telephone. The information available about the only person that participated by email is that was a men. The medium age of all participants in Opinião Pública using the telephone was 50,8. One important aspect of this observation was the origin and the occupation of participants. Here is obvious that most of people call from Lisbon with 21 phone calls and in the second place appears the North of the country with 11 calls.

In terms of occupation we made a distinction between the active sector and the non-active sector. In the non-active sector that was identified in 21 cases it was

found 10 retired people, eight unemployed and three housekeepers. In other hand here were 27<sup>1</sup> viewers representing the active sector.

	Participants <i>Fórum TSF</i>							
Engagment platform	Gender		Age	Origin		Occupation		
Telephone	Men	47	Without Information	Lisbon	24	Active	41	
	Women	2		North	20	Retired	5	
				Centre	5	Unemployed	2	
						Housekeeper	1	
Facebook	Men	11	Without Information					
	Women	2						
Web Site	Men	10	Without Information					
	Women	1						

**Table IV - Participants profile: Fórum TSF**

As posed before, Fórum TSF is a programme that uses more platforms for people to talk and take part of the emission than Opinião Pública. In the three tools identified there were more man than women. On telephone it was find 47 men and two women. As in SIC Notícias programme Opinião Pública, Fórum TSF in TSF the only information available in the web site and in Facebook was the gender. In the web site there were 10 men and one woman and in Facebook 11 men and only two women. The origin of participants that called by telephone to Fórum TSF was other aspect of this study. In this point Lisbon is the most represented city with 24 participants, - more than the cities from the North (20) and five from the Centre. One of the differences between Opinião Pública and Fórum TSF is that the number of participants with an active occupation, 41<sup>2</sup> in radio. In terms of non-active participants we found five retired people, two unemployed and one housekeeper.

<sup>1</sup> From the active sector we observed: one Administrative, one Chemical analyst, one Architect, one Social Assistant, one Technical Assistant, one Cook, three Commercials, one Seamstress, one Maid Office, two Cleaners, two Warehouse Employees, two Entrepreneurs, one Nurse, three Engineer, two Public Employe, one Geographer, one Police, one Driver, one Professor

<sup>2</sup> From the active sector we observed: Two lawyers, one Agronomist, one Postman, one commercial, six Merchants, one Flight attendant, one Economist, six Entrepreneurs, two Engineers, one Student, one Public Employee, one Commercial Manager, one Sports Manager, one Industrial, six Drivers, one Warehouse Employee, one Optometrist, four Professors, one Woman Desk, one Sociologist and one Therapist.



#### d) Guest's Profile

Opinião Pública						
Origin		Gender		Occupation	Theme Related	Invitation reason
Lisbon	3	Men	5	Professors	Related with the theme	5
North	2			Journalists		
				Lawyers		

**Table V- Guest's profile: Opinião Pública**

In the last point of this analysis, the objective is to understand the profile of guests invited to take part of the programme. Normally, both of the studied formats have one or more guests in charge of the opinion about the issue in discussion. One important thing about the presence of these specialists is that, usually, they do not reply to what viewers and listeners say during their intervention.

The first point of observation shows that there is a balance between North and Lisbon when the objective is to understand guest's origin. Between 26<sup>th</sup> March and 2<sup>nd</sup> April of 2012 it was identified three people from Lisbon and two from North. As it easy to recognise all five guests were man. Five men were invited to the programme during the five days of study. One important fact is that most of the guests invited were journalists and academics, both represented in two days. Other object studied is the relation with the study theme. Here the purpose is to understand if guests have knowledge, for their studies or professional experience, to talk about the issue. Opinião Pública only has received guests related with the theme. The last item to analyse is related with the invitation reason or the mote. In this point the important is to know if guests have a direct involvement with the theme- actors- or not- observers. This programme had five observes during the five days of study.

Fórum TSF					
Origin		Gender		Occupation	Theme related
Lisbon	22	Men	21	Politicians	Related with the theme 23
				Unions	
				Journalists	
				Academics	
North	1	Women	2		
					Invitation reason
					Observers 7
					Actors 16

**Table VI- Guest's profile: Fórum TSF**

This first difference between Opinião Pública and Fórum TSF in this point is the guest's number. While Opinião Pública have received only five guest's, Fórum TSF had 23, much more that only one per programme. Here guest's origin presents more diverse results. 22 guets were from Lisbon and only one came from North. When the subject is the gender, men are much more represented, with 21, than women with only two. Fórum TSF has also a diverge range of occupation than the television format. Here is possible to identify eight politicians, six guests from unions, four journalists, three academics and two people from institutions. As in Opinião Pública all guests were theme related. In the last point were observed 16 actors and seven observers. In other words there were more invited guests with an active influence on the discussed subject than in Opinião Pública.

## **Final remarks: participants' profile not that different, as productions work differently towards social media**

After discussing the last data, it is possible to conclude that, both programmes, Opinião Pública on television SIC Notícias and Fórum TSF on radio station TSF, are broadcasted in a time period where people are most likely to start working. Having in mind this sociological tendency, the two programmes aim to fill an open space in the media. Taking into account some general lack of opportunities for people talk in the media, especially in informative, there is though a little difference in these two productions. Fórum TSF, for instance, deals with a free inscription tax on those who want to participate, as Opinião Pública acts differently, and people have to pay to be able to participate live by the telephone. Even the public Portuguese channel RTP that had a public opinion forum on RTP Informação, on paid television, ended in the first months of 2012.

Comparing the two formats, while Opinião Pública is still very dependent of telephone and has not an active appeal to engagement by digital platforms, Fórum TSF, that has also very participants by telephone, gives a real opportunity for digital engagement. The Facebook page and the web site of the radio programme are well develop and are much more active than what is happening in the television format. Here it is possible to find a digital public opinion forum, fostered by a dynamic strategy to include citizens' opinions on air.

Regardless different gates to participate, the general profile of participants in the two platforms remains close. They are men, from Lisbon and are active workers. Here, the distinctive point is that on television there were found more non-active people, like unemployed and retired, than on radio. It is possible explained because radio is a mobile platform and television is still a tool used, most of the time, at home.

About the invited guests to both programmes it is possible to draw two different profiles. One television they are man, from Lisbon, journalist or academics, related with the theme and observers. Talking about the radio, these commentators are men, from Lisbon, politicians, related with the theme and actors.

The opinion public forums are a phenomenon that must be studied during the time. As it was possible to see it is not a common kind of program, both on radio and on television, and the digital revolution, that is more present on Portuguese radio than on Portuguese television, can be a new challenge for media. It is also important to understand what motivates, or not, citizens to be part of this programmes and the real effect that these formats have in civil society.

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